

## A Winter Solstice for Iolaus

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Summary: Little Iolaus learns the lesson of love from Alchemene.

### A Winter Solstice for Iolaus

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SUMMARY: Thanks to Athena, Iolaus experiences his first Winter Solstice with Alchemene and Hercules. Iolaus helps Hercules get over missing his brother Iphicles over Winter Solstice. Most importantly, Iolaus learns just how much Alchemene really means to him and how much they mean to each other as mother and son.

### CHAPTER 1

Winter Solstice festival is in full swing in Thebes. The townspeople are making preparations. The clowns and actors have arrived. Alchemene notes the festive air while little Hercules circles about his mother restlessly.

"Mother, will Iphicles spend Winter Solstice with us? Do you think? I really miss him! Can't you talk to Aunt and Uncle and let Iphicles come visit us?" asked Hercules.

Alchemene shakes her head. She knows that little Hercules has no understanding as to why Iphicles was sent away in the first place. After Hercules' birth, many family members felt Alchemene to be an unfit mother because Hercules was born out of wedlock. Alchemene did not have the heart to tell little Hercules the truth.

"Honey, we'll have a grand Winter Solstice. We will exchange gifts. We will eat a lot of food just you and I, together...You can write Iphicles another letter and tell him all about it...now go run along

now..." said Alchemene. It tore at Alchemene's heart not to have Iphicles at Winter Solstice. She missed Iphicles every day and so did little Hercules.

"Mother, is it my fault that Iphicles isn't with us anymore? Was it something I did to hurt Iphicles?..for even at 6 years of age, Hercules was aware of his strength and was careful not to use it too much for fear of hurting others...Mother, was it because I bruised Iphicles..I'm sorry..I try to be careful..said Hercules looking on the ground with unshed tears.

"Hercules, look at me, azure eyes met azure eyes as mother and son came face to face, it is NOT your fault that Iphicles left. Iphicles is a big boy now. He has to get his education at that fancy school..and only his rich aunt and uncle can pay the tuition and we live so far away...that's why Iphicles is gone..NOT BECAUSE OF YOU..besides in his last letter didn't Iphicles mention how much he missed us?..your brother may be gone but he will always be here..in our hearts..okay Hercules?"said Alchemene reassuringly.

"Yes, Mother...I love you.." said Hercules as he gave us mother a big bear hug.

At the same moment, Eurytheia was walking through the marketplace with little Iolaus doing some shopping. Eurytheia watched the merriment of the villagers. The clowns with their painted smiles; the mimes with their funny acts; the storytellers telling the outrageous tales of lost sailors and monsters; the merchants with their wares; She worries about Iolaus, that blond-haired little moppet with the blue cerulean eyes, she knows that Skouras would be home come Winter Solstice's eve. She worries about Iolaus' safety. It is at that moment she notices Alchemene and little Hercules in the marketplace....

"Iolaus, look there's Hercules, why don't you go and say hi to him" said Eurytheia.

Iolaus'blue cerulean eyes widens as he sees his best friend Hercules in the marketplace. "Yes, mother...can I have a dinar so that Hercules and I can get something to eat..his blue eyes pleaded with his mother..?" asked Iolaus.

"Of course, son...here why don't you treat little Hercules for a change..now go and be good...no mischief or pranks you hear Iolaus..she offered good-naturedly...

"No mother, I won't get in any trouble" returned Iolaus..his golden curly locks flying in the wind as he runs to join Hercules in the square.

As Eurytheia sees little Iolaus off, she wishes that Skouras could see what a good heart Iolaus has. Instead of beating Iolaus for being so small, she wishes that Skouras would love his only son and not hurt him. On Winter Solstice Eve, Skouras' beating would become even more severe as the festivities of Winter Solstice only served to heighten his disappointment at having produced such a "runt" for a son. No, this year Eurytheia would make sure Iolaus would not get hurt so she has decided to approach Alchemene with a huge favor.

"Hello, Alchemene, happy Winter Solstice..have you gotten all your shopping done? How's little Iphicles and Hercules this holiday season? asked Eurytheia.

"Oh..Hercules is fine..but Iphicles..well..he's not living with me anymore.." said Alchemene sadly.

"Why? What ever happened?" asked Eurytheia.

"Now that Iphicles is coming of age, my husband's family, Amphytrion's brother and wife has decided to take Iphicles in. They no longer feel it is proper for Iphicles to be raised by a woman who gave birth out of wedlock...so they took Iphicles away from us...Hercules is taking this really hard. said Alchemene..watching her son play with Iolaus..."He thinks it is somehow his fault...but I want to thank you for allowing Iolaus to be friends with Hercules...you have no idea what this means to Hercules now..."

An idea sprang in Eurytheia's head as she had been contemplating how to ask Alchemene to invite Iolaus over to spend Winter Solstice with Hercules..."You know Alchemene...things are not going that well at my house either..Skouras will be coming home soon for Winter Solstice...I'm worried about Iolaus...you know what I mean.....but what if Iolaus could spend Winter Solstice with you and Hercules? Perhaps Hercules would not miss Iphicles as much! said Eurytheia hopefully.

Alchemene knew about Skouras' famous temper and how he beat little Iolaus. She had frequently seen the bruises on little Iolaus.."Eurytheia..Iolaus is always welcome in my house..I would be glad to have Iolaus stay over my house for Winter Solstice.."

Eurytheia felt as if a weight had been lifted. She knew that Iolaus would be safe and that Iolaus would be able to celebrate his first Winter Solstice without fear...."Oh Alchemene thank you so much for your kind offer..her cerulean blue eyes so identical to those of Iolaus filling with tears as she gladly hugged her best friend....

"Alchemene, Iolaus will be so glad to hear that he will be able to spend Winter Solstice with Hercules..let me tell him..okay? said Eurytheia..

"Sure, Eurytheia..but you know you and the other children are also welcome at my house for Winter Solstice too..the harvest was good this year..I'll have plenty of food on the table..offered Alchemene...

"Thank you Alchemene..but ...Skouras will be home and I have to make Winter Solstice special just for him..says Eurytheia evasively.

Alchemene sees her friend's cerulean blue eyes fill with fear. She shudders at the thought of being married to such a brute like Skouras. Sympathy and compassion fills her heart as she says "Just know that my door will always be open should you ever need me...finished Alchemene..

"I know, you are a good friend, you have a kind and compassionate

heart like your son..Iolaus talks nothing but about Hercules...said Eurytheia gratefully.."I will go tell Iolaus the great news...and she ran off to join her son..."

As Alchemene watches her best friend run off to join Iolaus, Alchemene noticed the resemblance between Eurytheia and Iolaus. Both Eurytheia and Iolaus have the same curly blond hair and the same mischevious blue eyes..she watched as Eurytehia gave Iolaus the good news....she watched as little Iolaus jumped up and down in happiness with the same boundless energy as his mother....

"Iolaus, I want you to listen to me..cerulean blue eyes met cerulean blue eyes..you know that Hercules misses Iphicles..this will be the first time that Alchemene and Hercules will be celebrating Winter's Solstice without Iphicles...I want you to be a big boy and I want you to spend Winter Solstice with Alchemene and Hercules...said Eurytheia...

"Mother, you mean I won't be spending Winter Solstice with you...? asked Iolaus in bewilderment...

"Oh Iolaus, I want you to know that I love you with all my heart..but Hercules needs you..he really misses his brother...you are Hercules' best friend..like a brother to him..do this for Hercules..Iolaus.." pleaded Eurytheia hoping that Iolaus would not suspect the real reason for Iolaus did not yet know that Skouras was coming home for Winter Solstice this year...she hoped the ruse would work....

"Of course, mother...I would be glad to spend Winter Solstice with Hercules and Alchemene especially since they need me...I love Hercules like a brother..I don't want to see him sad...added Iolaus

"I'm so proud of you my son, you have the heart of the greatest heros..don't let anyone persuade you otherwise" said Eurytheia as she hugged her son fiercely afraid to let him go.

"Alchemene, I want you to know that I've just told Iolaus that he will be spending Winter Solstice with you and he is as happy as a lark...once again..thank you..said Eurytheia.

"Think nothing of it Eurytheia..I wish you a Happy Winter Solstice..May the Gods be with you..said Alchemene as she watched Eurytheia disappear into the marketplace. Alchemene prayed to whatever benevolent God was listening that Eurytheia and the other children would have a safe Winter Solstice holiday. Alchemene sighed and wished there was more she could do to help her best friend....

## CHAPTER 2

"Herc..have you heard..I'm going to be spending Winter Solstice with you and Alchemene..imagine my first sleepover..isn't it exciting? piped Iolaus excitedly as Iolaus literally bounced as he walked..."Hello, earth to Herc..haven't you heard a word I've been saying...says Iolaus his cerulean blue eyes looking at Herc in a concerned manner...

"Yes, Iolaus, I heard you...Winter Solstice...I'm really glad that you'll be spending Winter Solstice with us said Hercules in a flat

voice...

"Gee, you can sound a little more excited...I mean I've never been invited to your house for a sleepover before just think of all the fun we'll have..playing shadow games with our fingers..telling creepy stories to each other...added Iolaus excitedly...as he tried unsuccessfully to cheer his best friend up..

"It's Iphicles isn't it? You miss him. My mother told me about it. I'm sorry Iphicles can't join us for Winter Solstice..added Iolaus cautiously...as Iolaus said these kind words..Hercules started to cry.

"You know, Iolaus, it's my fault that Iphicles can't make it for Winter Solstice this year. Iph and I were arguing..I don't remember anymore why...anyway Iph pushed me..and I guess I was mad at Iph so I pushed him back..but Iolaus, I forgot about my strength..I pushed him too hard..Iph fell down...got a bruise on his head...I didn't mean to hurt him...They took Iphicles away because everyone thinks I'll hurt him again...said Hercules.

"Believe me Hercules, I know people who hurt others, but you are NOT one of them..you have a kind soul..I know you didn't mean to hurt Iphicles on purpose...I'm sure that's not the reason why Iphicles is gone...I know..said Iolaus as he thought about Skouras. Skouras would throw Iolaus around like a rag doll on purpose. Iolaus knew in his heart Hercules could never harm a fly even with his half-God strength.

"Really, Iolaus..you believe in me...you know..you sound like mother..you are one of the only boys who don't make fun of me because of my strength..you are a really special friend...still..I just wish I could make Iphicles understand....Iolaus interrupted Hercules in mid speech for he could see how sad Hercules was so he changed the subject.

"Look Herc, why don't we go shopping for a gift for Alchemene..I know just the gift for her..come on it's this way..as Iolaus bounced towards the blacksmith shop.

Overcome with curiosity, Hercules followed his blond friend into the blacksmith's shop. Hercules wondered what gift Iolaus had planned for his mother.

"Hello, Uncle Marcus" said Iolaus "Have you finished the gift I asked for?"

"Yeah, all you have to do, Iolaus is to add the engraving.." said Marcus, the blacksmith.

"What do you think Herc? It's beautiful isn't it? said Iolaus glowing with pride. "I practically made this piece myself..Marcus taught me how to forge it...do you think Alchemene will like it? Do you Herc? asked Iolaus.

Hercules knew just how attached Iolaus had become to Alchemene and how much Alchemene approval meant to Iolaus. Hercules also knew that Alchemene loved Iolaus like her own son. Alchemene had told Hercules many times about the story about how in the future Iolaus would become his best friend and travelled into the past to save his

life...Hercules knew the bond between Alchemene and Iolaus..so he answered simply:

"Iolaus..she'll love your gift...I know she will" said Hercules and he meant it with all his heart.

"Well, Herc, what do you think the engraving should say? asked Iolaus his cerulean blue eyes inquiring into Hercules' azure eyes....

"Just write what's in your heart..if there's one thing Mother has taught me is that you have to follow your heart..so Iolaus follow your heart..said Hercules

"Okay, Herc..you have to turn around.. I want to surprise you and Alchemene with what I have to say..come on..Herc..turn around..and no peeking ! teased Iolaus as he engraved the words of his heart into the gift....

"Okay Iolaus, I have my eyes closed and I'm not peeking...besides Iolaus..you know I think you forget I can't read yet...but Hercules noticed Iolaus was no longer listening as he was busy writing something onto the gift and then allowing the hot metal to cool.

Marcus looked up from his work. He was glad that Iolaus had finally found a friend in Hercules. It infuriated him that Skouras took such little pride in his son's accomplishments. Marcus knew that Iolaus was a good hunter, good tracker, excellent archer, fisherman, blacksmith, athlete, for although Iolaus was small of stature, Marcus knew that Iolaus was big at heart.

"Okay I think Iolaus, your gift to Alchemene is ready. I am so proud of you, son at how fast you learned how to forge this piece of jewelry..I know Alchemene will love it...complimented Marcus. Iolaus blushed for very rarely in his life had people ever complimented him or noticed anything good about him.

"Oh, Iolaus, Marcus is right. This gift is beautiful. Mother will be overjoyed. This will be the best gift ever gushed Hercules as he stared at the gift.

"Thank you, Marcus, for everything. I promise to work for you the next month to help pay off this gift" added Iolaus.

"Yes, Marcus, you can count me in on it too. I'll also help out to thank you for Mother's gift...added an eager Hercules.."Don't worry..I'm big for my age..please say I'm old enough to work for you..like Iolaus.." pleaded Hercules "You can't tell Mother without ruining the surprise of the gift...PLEASE.....

"Okay, Hercules, you may work alongside Iolaus..said Marcus "but you will have to learn blacksmithing like Iolaus has...is that a deal, Hercules?

"Oh, yes...definitely!" said an overjoyed Hercules glad to be treated like an adult...like Iolaus (even though Iolaus was two years older than Hercules)

"Come on Herc, now that we have the gift for Alchemene, we have to

hunt for dinner otherwise we'll have nothing to eat...I'm hungry..let's hunt for lunch now that I think of it...wait a minute..my mother gave me a few dinars..why don't we have lunch in town and then hunt for dinner? Iolaus started to sprint towards the nearest restaurant.."Last one to the restaurant is a rotten egg" uttered Iolaus as he followed the smell of food to a nearby eatery with Hercules running close behind Iolaus.....

"Hey, Iolaus..one of these days.. I'll beat you yet..as an out of breath Hercules arrived just a few seconds after Iolaus into the restaurant....The smell of baklava and other foods wafting in the air..greeting Hercules and Iolaus as they entered the restaurant. A young girl with braids in her hair approach Hercules and Iolaus' table and ask them what they want for lunch.

Cora was helping out at her father's restaurant. Her father had told her that someday when he retires he would hand the restaurant over to Cora. As Cora was cleaning up in the kitchen, she noticed the familiar flash of blue light out of the corner of her eye which usually announced the arrival of Artemis.

"Hello, Cora, how's my future Huntress doing?" asked Artemis.

Cora bowed her head in respect and answered. "Fine, my mistress, Artemis, how may I serve you?"

"First, I want to say that I am very proud of you. You have progressed tremendously in your archery and hunting skills. I know I have chosen well to have you as one of my most loyal followers someday" added Artemis.

Cora blushed at the compliment. "Thank you my mistress..I look forward to someday becoming the Huntress and serving as your priestess..Artemis"

"Now, as for your service to me, I want you to look out for Hercules and Iolaus. Both Hercules and Iolaus are destined to become great heroes someday. For now, I just want you to get to know them." said Artemis as she disappeared in a blue flash of light.

Before Artemis disappears, Cora responds "Yes, Artemis..I will do as you say.." Cora approaches Iolaus and Hercules' table. She found it hard to believe that these young boys would someday become heroes. Hercules looked shy and withdrawn while Iolaus looked ready to jump out of his skin.

Iolaus, hungry as always practically yells at Cora for the food "Hello, Cora, I'm starving and today I'm THE ONE treating Hercules, so what's the special?" asked Iolaus as the sunlight accentuated the goldness of his hair.

"Well, paused Cora remembering Artemis' words about these young boys being future heroes...she decided that the special of the day should be "Well, boys, the special for today are hero sandwiches....." Cora thought this ought to please Artemis tremendously.....

"Okay, I'll have two hero sandwiches and make that one hero sandwich for Hercules..said Iolaus cheerfully his cerulean blue eyes twinkling as he thought about the food.

Meanwhile, Hercules shy as ever especially in front of a pretty girl like Cora, did not utter a word. Instead, he spent his time carefully studying the wood grain on the table. So Cora decided to break the ice since it was Artemis' order for her to get to know them BOTH.

"Hercules, will you have mustard or ketchup on your hero sandwich?" asked Cora .

Hercules blushed and said simply "Ketchup please". In his shyness, his lisp was ever so slight. At that moment Iolaus interrupted and said "I'll have both mustard, ketchup..you know the works..after all today I'm paying...it's Winter Solstice..." his cerulean eyes smiling as he proudly handed the dinars to Cora.

"Coming right up, boys" said Cora " oh..and Iolaus thanks for the tip.." as she impishly walked away..

"Wait..Cora..I wanted change back..it wasn't a tip..Wait.." said an anxious Iolaus who now had no money to buy Hercules a present.

"You know, Iolaus, thanks to you, I am actually looking forward to Winter Solstice. I wonder what presents Mother will have under the tree this year..last year she got me those blue marbles...I definitely know she'll love your present...I can't wait...I just wish Iph could be here..said Hercules sadly....

"You know Herc, I'm sure wherever Iphicles is, he's misses you too. Don't worry Herc after lunch we'll go hunting and we'll have the best Winter Solstice dinner ever! You watch! says Iolaus his cerulean eyes glowing with anticipation at the coming feast.

"Here you go, boys, your hero sandwiches..Hercules..your hero sandwich with ketchup and Iolaus, your hero sandwich with EVERYTHING on top.." Cora watched amusedly as Iolaus devoured his two sandwiches almost instantaneously while Hercules spent his time blushing and eating slowly for Hercules was so painfully shy as he was aware that Cora was watching them eat.

"That was a great lunch Iolaus..thanks for treating me..that's a great Winter Solstice gift..not even Iphicles has treated me to lunch before..gushed Hercules...

"Really? Iphicles never took you out to lunch? asked Iolaus.

"Well, Iphicles is so much older than me, Iolaus. Iph always had so many other friends that he treated to lunch. I was just his kid brother who followed him around. but before Hercules could continue Iolaus interrupted

"Come on Herc, let's start hunting for our Winter Solstice dinner...last one to the woods is a rotten egg! as Iolaus rushed off into the woods his blond hair flying in the wind.

"Hercules..you're making too much noise..you've got to learn NOT to step on every twig and branch..you're scaring the wildlife away..haven't you ever gone hunting before? asked an annoyed Iolaus...

"Well, actually..no" said Hercules. "Iphicles made me stay behind



because he said I was too little and that I would just get lost...."

"What about your father? Having you ever gone hunting with him? asked Iolaus

"Zeus? Go hunting with me? No, I've never met my father Iolaus..actually I've never even seen him. I don't even know what he looks like..I wish I did though..I've often wondered what it would be like to go hunting with "Dad" you know like the other boys do with their Dads..said Hercules wistfully..."Have you gone hunting with your Dad, Skouras?"

"No!" answered Iolaus curtly. "My Dad is always off at war. He is never home. I learned all my hunting skills from Marcus, the blacksmith." Iolaus did not want Hercules to know that whenever Skouras was home, he and his Dad would argue with Iolaus at the losing end of the argument.

"Herc, do try to make less noise..you walk through the woods like an elephant..the animals can hear us coming for miles said an annoyed Iolaus.

"I'm sorry, Iolaus..I've never gone hunting before. Could you teach me YOUR hunting skills? You know the ones Marcus taught you? You're so lucky to have someone teach you hunting" said Hercules close to tears for Hercules did not want to disappoint Iolaus the way he did Iphicles.

Iolaus noticed the unshed tears on Hercules' face and realized he'd been too harsh with him. After all, nobody had ever bothered to teach Hercules any hunting skills. Iolaus never knew that Hercules' had never met his father even once. He promised to be more understanding to Herc.

"Listen, Herc, I'm sorry..I didn't know this was your first hunting trip..I'll teach you whatever hunting skills I know AND next time Marcus and I plan a hunting trip you can come along..Marcus is a great hunter and so is my Uncle Flavius..would you like to come along Herc? asked Iolaus hoping this offer would cheer Hercules up...

"Really Iolaus..a real hunting trip with real hunters..oh Iolaus..Hercules' azure eyes opening wide with wonder.."that would be SO MUCH FUN! I can't wait!"

"Well, since we can't hunt for prey on this hunting trip I'll just check the traps Uncle Flavius and Marcus set and see what they caught and that'll have to do for dinner..the sun is setting and we don't have much light left...let's go check the traps..okay Herc?"

"Sure Iolaus..whatever you say..said Hercules. for he had no idea what Iolaus was talking about. He had never seen traps before. Alchemene always got her food at the marketplace and out of her garden. This whole hunting trip was like a new adventure for Hercules. Already, Hercules was grateful to Iolaus for teaching him this new experience and not leaving him behind like Iphicles did.

Even at this young age, Iolaus was already an accomplished hunter. In

the woods, Iolaus was in his natural element blending in with his environment. Iolaus moved with the stealth and skill that would make him Artemis' favorite follower, her Golden Hunter. Hercules held his breath as he admired Iolaus skills in the woods.

"Well, I guess this trap caught us a fat rabbit..not much for a Winter Solstice meal but I guess it'll have to do" pondered Iolaus as he looked at the rabbit carefully.

"Oh look Iolaus, this trap has caught a bird..we can add that to the Winter Solstice meal..Mother cooks really well with all those herbs she adds from her garden..I'm sure this rabbit and this bird will be enough for dinner..I'm sorry I was so noisy that I ruined your hunting trip Iolaus..added a guilt-ridden Hercules.

"Don't worry..on our next hunting trip..I'll have Marcus and Uncle Flavius teach you what you need to know..on my first hunting trip..I tripped and twisted my ankle and scared the deer away when I screamed in pain..Uncle Flavius was furious at me because he had been chasing that deer for weeks! So don't worry Herc..you'll learn! reassured Iolaus.

."Come on..let's get back to Alchemene's so she can cook what we've caught!"added Iolaus..."Hurry up Herc, I'm hungry! I can't wait to eat let's get to your house NOW! Iolaus sprinted off in the direction of Alchemene's house with Hercules following close behind

Alchemene had spent the day cooking Winter Solstice dinner. She had the duck cooking in the oven. The one advantage for having Zeus as father of Hercules was her ability to ask Zeus for small favors such as having a duck once a year for Winter Solstice dinner. Alchemene would equally distribute her extra food to her neighbors like Eurytheia who had otherwise have nothing to eat since Skouras rarely came home anymore.

"Oh Herc, I can smell the food..it smells HEAVENLY! piped an enthusiastic Iolaus.."I think she's cooking duck.." Iolaus continued to run even faster as the aroma of roasted duck reached his nostrils.

"Iolaus..Wait up..you're running too fast.."as Hercules tripped and stumbled to keep with Iolaus "Iolaus..it's no big deal..it's just duck..Mother cooks it every year for Winter Solstice...Iolaus..." Hercules found himself talking to empty air as Iolaus sped ahead into Alchemene's kitchen with the skinned rabbit and bird in his hands.

An amused Alchemene watched from her stove as she saw Iolaus rush into the house. Iolaus had leaves and twigs stuck all over his clothes and his blond curly hair was a mess. Mud covered parts of his skin. Hercules came running in with the same kind of mud, twigs and leaves all over him. Well mused Alchemene..at least Hercules finally found a friend he could have fun with...Alchemene noticed the rabbit and duck Iolaus left behind and resolved to cook them with the duck..yes..she had to remember to thank Iolaus for his generosity.....

"Now you boys..get washed up..before dinner..the lake is just behind the house..go take a dunk..I will not have mud tracking inside my house! Now go to the lake! said Alchemene.

Surprisingly enough both boys responded in unison " Yes, Mother!" and they ran off to the lake both racing each other to see who could run the fastest to dunk themselves in the lake. For once, Hercules won. It seemed Iolaus was not that eager to go into the lake.

Hercules took off his clothes and jumped into the lake first. Iolaus hesitated. Hercules teased "Come on Iolaus, Mother wants us to wash up..come jump in the lake..urged Hercules...Hercules noticed the look of fear on Iolaus' face..and asked "Haven't you ever gone swimming before?"

"Well, Herc, no..I don't know how to swim..admitted an embarrassed Iolaus.

With no hesitation, Hercules got out of the water and pushed Iolaus into the water himself. Iolaus fell into the water with a loud splash and under much protest.."Herc, help! what are you doing? Are you trying to drown me? I can't swim!" said Iolaus flailing in the water.

"Oh Iolaus..don't be such a chicken..you're doing just fine..can't you see you're treading water as we speak! See swimming is no big deal! said an amused Hercules.

"You're right Herc, I'm not sinking..I'm floating..hey this swimming thing is fun..where did you learn to swim Herc? asked Iolaus.

Hercules blushed at the memory as he recounted the story to Iolaus.."Well it was simple..Iphicles pushed me into the lake..I had no choice but to learn to swim or drown..so that's how I learned to swim"

From a distance, they heard Alchemene's voice "Okay boys..get out of the lake..dinner is ready! Come on Winter Solstice dinner is ready!

### CHAPTER 3

Alchemene had the table set. The roast duck was in the middle of the table followed by all the trimmings. There was blueberry pie as well as salads and herbs fresh picked from the garden. Iolaus gazed at wonder at all this bounty. Outside of a restaurant, he had never seen so much food in one place before in his life. Iolaus looked as if his eyes were about to pop out of his head.

"Alchemene, the table looks great! the food looks ever so delicious! Can we start eating now? asked Iolaus his enthusiasm bouncing off the walls..his blue cerulean eyes in awe of the spectacle of food before him...

"Mother, you've outdone yourself..I just wish Iph could be with us to share the duck..I mean he loved the roast duck..he...used to sit at the head of the table..said Hercules...

"I know that you miss Iphicles Hercules..and so do I..but we have Iolaus here this Winter Solstice..we must not let Iolaus feel left out by talking about Iphicles too much...come on..eat the duck and you'll feel better Hercules " said Alchemene as she gave her youngest

son a much needed hug.

Without being aware of it, Iolaus sat in Iphicles' old seat at the head of the table. Iolaus was also the first one to dig into the food. Watching Iolaus eat with such relish gave both Alchemene and Hercules much pleasure. Iolaus wolfed down his food.

"Alchemene..said Iolaus with food in his mouth "You are the best cook..I've never had roast duck before..I always thought only princes and kings had duck.."as Iolaus took yet another mouthful of food, he continued to talk "This duck tastes so mouthwatering good..it's great..! said Iolaus...Iolaus hesitated to talk about how scarce food was in his home for he did not want Hercules and Alchemene to be ashamed of him.

Alchemene knew that Iolaus was too ashamed to talk about what he ate at his house. She knew that Eurytheia barely had enough dinars to keep vegetables in the house let alone roasted duck. Alchemene wished that Skouras had not come home so that she could invite the rest of Iolaus' family to feast on Zeus' duck.

"Now, we must all stop a moment to give thanks to the Greek Gods for what we have this year..I'll start..I want to give thanks to Zeus for my beautiful son Hercules, this roast duck, and for the Gods to have sent such a sweet and wonderful boy to be Hercules' friend, Iolaus to be at our Winter Solstice dinner tonight" started Alchemene. "Okay, Hercules..your turn..what are you thankful for this year?

"I also want to thank my father Zeus for this roasted duck that he gives us each year at Winter Solstice. I want to thank Mother for cooking this wonderful dinner and for her love and generosity..I want to thank Iolaus for being my best friend and sticking up for me when the others made fun of me in the village" said Hercules.

"I want to thank Iolaus when he punched those goons for calling me names like half-God bastard..or especially when they called Mother names..Hercules stopped short as he wanted to wish that Iphicles was with them..Iolaus could see the sadness come into those blue azure eyes so he continued for Hercules....

"I, Iolaus, want to thank Alchemene for inviting me here to Winter Solstice..for giving me my first roast duck...I want to thank the Greek Gods for giving me Hercules as a best friend..someone who stuck up for me when the others called me names too..for having someone to fish with...for Alchemene for her love and warmth..ended Iolaus with tears in his eyes.

Iolaus looked up at Alchemene and in her blue azure eyes so identical to those of Hercules he saw love and compassion, approval, and warmth..Overcome with emotion, Alchemene gave Iolaus an impulsive hug and she whispered in Iolaus' ear "I love you, Iolaus, never forget, you are like a son to me..I am so proud of who you are..if ever you need anything or a shoulder to cry on..you know, son, you can count on me to be there for you"

As Alchemene whispered these loving words into Iolaus' ear, Iolaus broke down and cried tears of happiness. After all the insults he had had to endure from his father being called "runt", "crybaby", "failure"..to have the love of this beautiful woman..this

unconditional love..Iolaus put his head in Alchemene's shoulder and cried.

Through his tears with a strangled voice, Iolaus managed to say "I love you too Alchemene..with all my heart.." Hercules watched this display of emotion and not wanting to be left out, he approached Iolaus and his mother and hugged them both with tears in his eyes and said "Mother, Iolaus, I love you both..you are my family"...

Hercules jumped to his feet and said "Let's tell stories by the fire..always after dinner we always tell stories by the fire before going to bed and then tomorrow morning we'll open the presents...come on Iolaus..tell us some fun stories about how you celebrate Winter Solstice at your house.."

This innocent request only brought pain to Iolaus' heart for in reality, Iolaus had never really celebrated Winter Solstice before...not like at Hercules' house...Alchemene watched the pain come across Iolaus' cerulean blue eyes and she knew the abuse that Iolaus suffered at the hands of his father Skouras so she filled in for Iolaus..

"Iolaus can't remember alot of the Winter Solstices because he's too young but Eurytheia has told me that at Iolaus' house..they exchange presents right after dinner rather than wait for morning" lied Alchemene.."isn't that right..Iolaus"

With his eyes aglow with shame, Iolaus answered "Yeah, that's right..Alchemene..we exchange presents right after dinner..." Alchemene proceeded to change the subject.."Why don't you boys tell me what you did today? Why were you boys covered with twigs and leaves earlier today when I saw you in the kitchen? she asked Hercules.

At that moment, Iolaus raised his eyes in gratitude and love to the woman who seemed to understand his plight and Alchemene returned that look with a look of compassion and love. She understood Iolaus' need to keep his homelife private from Hercules at least for now. Both Alchemene and Iolaus wanted to keep Hercules' mind off Iphicles for they both knew how much Hercules' heart ached for Iphicles' presence especially during Winter Solstice Eve. "Actually Mother, I'm proud to say that today I went on my first hunting trip with Iolaus! Iolaus is a great hunter..he can track and he can do all kinds of stuff in the woods..I mean he's real quiet and everything began Hercules..Oh..and he promised that he's going to teach me all his hunting skills so that I can become a great hunter just like him.." said Hercules..

"Yes, Hercules is a fast learner Alchemene. Next time my Uncle Flavius and Marcus and I go hunting, we intend to take Hercules with us...so that Hercules can learn to be quiet while in the woods and not trample the forest like a wild elephant giggled Iolaus...

"I do NOT trample the forest like a wild elephant..Oh and you should see how Iolaus swims Mother..I dropped him in the water and he yells "Help! Help!" he doesn't even know how to tread water and he can barely float! retorted Hercules

"Well after you dropped me in the water, I learned to swim pretty

fast didn't I? I can now swim across the whole pool! I'll race you to see who can swim the fastest to the island in the middle of the watering hole! Betcha I can beat you! argued Iolaus

"Okay..boys..boys..this is meant to be storytime..a time for sharing especially during Winter Solstice season..I think you boys are just tired..why don't we all turn in early tonight and tomorrow we can open the gifts okay? reassured Alchemene..

"Alright Mother..I can't wait to see what my gifts will be" replied Hercules and he dutifully kissed his mother on the cheek before turning in to bed.

"Good night Alchemene..I love you.." said Iolaus and he too kissed Alchemene on the cheek before turning in to bed. "Good night Iolaus..I love you too..like a son.. and sweet dreams" as she tucked both of her "sons" in bed. Iolaus and Hercules fell asleep immediately. Alchemene looked at her two sons..one a son by blood, Hercules and the other the son of her heart, Iolaus. She watched as the pale moonlight lit Iolaus' golden curls and she watched as they slept knowing that Morpheus would take good care of them until the morning. She doused the fire in the fireplace and went off to bed knowing her two boys were safe. She prayed to whatever benevolent God was listening that Iphicles was also safe and sound in bed.

Iolaus tossed and turned as the nightmare started....

"Mother, look I've made father a wood sculpture for Winter Solstice. I hope he likes it. said Iolaus hopefully. The wooden sculpture was of a soldier sitting proudly on his steed.

Eurytheia looked at her son and she knew what Skouras would do with the sculpture but she didn't have the heart to tell little Iolaus "It's a fine sculpture son..I'm sure your father will be really proud of you.." and she gave Iolaus a little hug and walked out of the room with tears in her eyes and wished just for once Skouras would appreciate Iolaus for who he really was..for truly Iolaus had a good heart and all he ever wanted was the love and approval of his father. It was heartbreaking to watch Skouras beat the light out of those dear blue cerulean eyes of his son. She knew Skouras would be home anytime now and every time Iolaus hoped his father would approve of him and every time Iolaus was beaten.

Badly beaten in battle, Skouras comes home in a bad mood. He demands his dinner. His face is set in a permanent scowl as he contemplates his losses.

"Eurytheia, where's my dinner! I'm hungry here! demands Skouras.

"Hello father..look what I got you for Winter Solstice" says little Iolaus as he shows his father the wooden sculpture of a soldier sitting proudly on a horse.

Skouras only gave his son a scathing look. Iolaus waited for his father to reply. Iolaus so much wanted his father's approval. He had spent a whole week carving the wooden soldier on the horse hoping his father would like his present. All little Iolaus ever wanted was his father's love.

Skouras ignored his son. Eurytheia bought him his dinner and Skouras dug right in. "My troops were not successful in their campaign. We did not win the hill. Tomorrow I must talk with the other Generals to plan a better strategy for the next campaign!"

"Oh but dear..tomorrow is Winter Solstice and tonight is Winter Solstice Eve..do stay with the family and open your present..look what little Iolaus made for you dear " pleaded Eurytheia.

Finally Skouras acknowledged his son. "I want a son who is strong and tall..not a artist son...I need a son who is good in soldiering skills...sculpting and art..that's a woman's task!.." "This sculpture is a disgrace..." he tosses the sculpture into the fire.

Tears run down Iolaus' face as he watches his father throw the wooden sculpture into the fire. Iolaus' heart breaks when he realizes that he has not won his father's love again. Iolaus runs out of the room..his world in tatters...Eurytheia runs after her son hoping to pick up the pieces.

Iolaus tosses and turns and screams in bed. Alchemene comes running into the bedroom as Iolaus screams "Oh Father..I just want you to love me.." "No Father don't hit me.." No Father..."..

"Iolaus, wake up you're having a nightmare" insisted Alchemene as she takes Iolaus into her arms and tries unsuccessfully to wake Iolaus up. Tears run down Iolaus closed eyes as he sleeps. Alchemene slowly rocks Iolaus..."Don't worry baby..you're safe here in my house..nobody will hurt you here..sh sh sh..get back to sleep.." Gradually Iolaus drifts back to sleep.

As Iolaus sleeps Alchemene continues to rock Iolaus in her arms like a mother would rock her newborn babe never letting go for fear that Iolaus would slip back into his nightmare. "I promise you Iolaus, I will never let you go..I love you Iolaus..sleep well" whispers Alchemene into the 8 year old's ear.

To Alchemene's surprise, Iolaus responds in his sleep "I love you too Alchemene..Mom..please don't ever let me go...don't let daddy get me.." Alchemene rocks Iolaus back to a gentle sleep. Meanwhile, Hercules sleeps like a log.

The morning sun shines through the window. The birds chirp on this crisp beautiful Winter Solstice Day. The gifts are all wrapped and stacked by the fireplace. Iolaus awakens at the crack of dawn. He is surprised to find Alchemene holding him tight. As Iolaus awakens, so does Alchemene.

"Good morning Iolaus..Happy Winter Solstice Day.." says Alchemene as she gives Iolaus a quick warm hug before leaving the room.

"Wait..Alchemene don't leave..I want to thank you for last night..I mean I remember the nightmare..and I remember what you said..You have no idea what it means to me to have you in my life..to know that you love me the way you do..says Iolaus his blue cerulean eyes filled with love and gratitude. " I just don't know how to thank you enough..words can't reveal just what my heart feels for you right now...I feel so happy..so at peace...so safe...because of you

Alchemene...because of you....

Alchemene kind compassionate azure eyes so identical to Hercules' spoke of unconditional love "Iolaus, whenever you want to talk about the nightmare or anything else that bothers you, I want you to know that my door is always open to you..if you ever need my help in any way..never be afraid to ask me..I love you like I love Hercules and Iphicles...don't ever forget that Iolaus...why don't we open our presents first?"

"Shouldn't we wait until Hercules wakes up?" asked Iolaus "Won't he feel left out if we begin without him?"

"No, Hercules is too young to understand. It is strange though..usually Hercules is the first to wake up on Winter Solstice morning to open his presents..perhaps this is sign from the Gods that we were meant to be together this Winter Solstice just you and me, Iolaus..to be mother and son...as Alchemene takes Iolaus' hand and leads him towards the fireplace.

"Here Alchemene, I want you to open your present first. It's from me and Herc." Iolaus hands Alchemene the jewelry box.

Alchemene opens her present. It's a silver broach shaped like a heart. With the following engraving inside: To Alchemene, the woman with the most beautiful heart in the world, I love you like a son would his mother. Iolaus

"Oh Iolaus, this is magnificent..did you make this broach yourself? It's so beautiful! You're so talented! exclaimed Alchemene as she put her arms around Iolaus in a grateful hug. Iolaus blushed for he was not used to such compliments.

"Alchemene, about the nightmare, I just want you to know you are the first person besides my mother and my sisters to really appreciate a gift that I made myself..Iolaus stopped himself as he thought about his father...

"Iolaus, I know this is hard for you to understand right now but your father loves you very much..he just doesn't know how to show it..you are a wonderful boy..with a big heart..no one can resist that megawatt smile of yours..you have to know that when you enter a room..you light it up with that smile..with your charm..with your wit..your father just doesn't know how to tell you that that's all..says Alchemene.

"Okay..enough of the compliments..here's my present for you, Iolaus..but first I want you to close your eyes..it's a surprise.." says Alchemene. Alchemene goes to the fireplace and takes out a purple vest and a matching purple knapsack while Iolaus keeps his eyes closed.

"Okay, you can open your eyes now..here are your presents..I also made my presents for you..first I must explain..the purple vest..you will wear this someday when you grow into a man..you will be Hercules' best friend and trust me..this WILL FIT I KNOW! as Alchemene thought back to the day when she was pregnant with Hercules and a crazy blond-haired man came through a vortex chasing a leather-clad woman. The blond-haired man announced "Hello, my name is Iolaus..I'm Hercules' best friend..I've come here from the future to



make sure Hercules is born...because the baby you carry will be the best friend I will have..Come on..we don't have time..."as Alchemene thought back to the past.

"Alchemene, a purple vest..it's way too big for me..how do you know I will grow into this? asked a mystified Iolaus

"Well, says Alchemene "I can see into the future..I know you will be a great man..a great hero..both you and Hercules together..and you will always wear this purple vest...but for now..this purple knapsack which has adjustable straps can fit you right now..you can put all your hunter gear inside...besides purple matches your eyes Iolaus"

With cerulean blue eyes filled with gratitude and love Iolaus breathlessly hugs Alchemene "I don't know how you can see the future..but I believe you..I love you with all my heart..you..Iolaus wasn't able to continue for he was choked with tears of happiness. As Iolaus hugs Alchemene he says "You are the mother of my heart, I will never forget this Winter Solstice..ever.."says Iolaus.

"Iolaus, I too, will never forget this Winter Solstice ever..I love you with all my heart..son of my heart...brother to Hercules..."says Alchemene as they remained clasp in a hug.

Artemis turns to Athena and asks: "So how long are you going to keep Hercules asleep? Tell me, Athena, did you plan this Winter Solstice for Iolaus all along?

"Skouras is a follower of Aries. I don't have any direct proof if Aries is tampering with Skouras..but I feel that our Golden Hunter deserves a decent Winter Solstice, so yes, I put the idea in Eurytheia's head to have Iolaus sleep over at Alchemene's house for Winter Solstice...Hercules will sleep until noon.." whispers Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom.

"Hey Athena..how's little Sweetcheeks doing? Look isn't that cute..he's bonding with Alchemene..he really is a charmer..even this little..! I think it's high time Sweetcheeks gets a Winter Solstice just for him..A winter Solstice for Sweetcheeks..Yep it's high time Athena, what a radical idea ! After all Skouras is a rat...oh Athena can I turn Skouras into a rat oh please? squeaked Aphrodite.

"No, unfortunately Skouras is a follower of Aries so he's probably under Aries' protection. I do know that eventually Iolaus will forgive his father..maybe not now..but in the future..Alchemene teaches Iolaus about unconditional love..that means loving someone no matter what...Alchemene's love will give Iolaus the strength to handle whatever Aries dishes out...says Athena..I will not let Hera or Aries destroy our Golden Hunter. This Winter Solstice, Iolaus learns how much Alchemene loves him.

Aphrodite interrupts "That's right..Winter Solstice is the season of LOVE!" giggles the Goddess of Love.

Athena continues "As long as Iolaus has Alchemene's love, nothing his father does will ever break his spirit..Iolaus has found his destiny..that is to be Hercules' best friend..future hero..future Guardian of the Light....Yes, Iolaus has finally come home. Happy Winter Solstice, Iolaus, you deserve it! exclaimed Athena as all

three goddesses disappeared in blue flashes of light.

End  
file.